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Conventional Love

Patrick Salem

He noticed that when she took notes—using her left hand twisted upon itself to write—he could see the black strap to her brassiere resting along the ridge of her shoulder tucked beneath her cable-knit ecru cotton sweater. Her hair—long and wavy, brown—framed her face, accentuating her thick eyebrows and long lashes. The look she presented to the world was one of studied concentration, but to him it was one of love.

Her lips, set below an aquiline nose, were impossibly perfect, rising to twin points and sloping away like the cables of the Golden Gate Bridge. Her lower lip reminded him of a coffee saucer, a quivering curve. Segmented by nature, her lips reminded him of a wedge of orange waiting to burst its taste into his mouth. The fingers of her right hand, resting against her temple, were long and thin. He imagined the feel of those fingers against his face, how soft they would be, soft and slightly cold. Nothing so delicate could have fire in them.

She sat with her ankles crossed in a pose that could be described only as innocent. He was at once torn between protecting that innocence and possessing it. He memorized the pattern of her breathing. He tried to imagine her face flushed with passion, or surprise, or terror.

When she raised her hand to ask a question, he saw the curve of her breasts, small but worthy of attention. Her stomach, made partly visible by the raising of her hand, was flat and smooth with tiny translucent hairs reflecting the light of the overhead fluorescents. He wondered if she knew how exposed she was, if she had planned it that morning standing before the mirror. He imagined her bedroom as soft and pink with lace and bows. The childhood objects around her would be surprised at her budding maturity.

When she caught him staring, he smiled slowly, hoping that she wouldn't notice his lips sticking to one another, his yellowed teeth, his hair plastered to his head. He hoped that she would see him as a handsome, loving, serious man—a man that she would choose from amongst the rest of the group. Maybe this one would accept his love, his affections.

She averted her gaze at his smile. He saw the roundness of her eyes forming perfect spheres against her slitting lids. She flushed slightly and turned in her seat, pushing her shoulders forward as though wrapping herself in an invisible blanket. Not again, please not again, he thought hoping that her body language was not rejecting but coquettish. He felt himself flush.

It was only a matter of time now before he started to perspire in earnest. He prayed that she wouldn't notice the growing deltas of sweat at the junctions of his bone thin arms and his tiny torso. He began to wheeze slightly as his discomfort increased.

This was his sixth year at a national conference. Every year it was held in a different city. He attended faithfully always hoping to make that connection—or any

way a positive connection, one that didn't make things worse for him—that would give his life meaning. Every year he had planned in his dreams how the story would go.

"We met at a conference in Los Angeles (Seattle, New York, Houston, Boston, now Minneapolis)," she would tell her friends. "He first impressed me with his understandings of actuarial tables (or margin calls, or massotherapy, or public transportation grids, or global marketing or modern social nihilism). He told a joke that made everyone laugh, and his smile just swept me off my feet."

In his mind movie, they were always winsome beauties like the woman he was staring at now, but truth be told he would have been happy with anyone. As long as she was nice to him, he would be happy.

He played by the rules for as long as he was able, always being gracious when rejected, always agreeing to be friends, even after hours of listening to their stories about how looks and money didn't matter. He tirelessly tried to be the stand-up guy that they said they wanted. He worked hard at it. He did everything to be that guy. But they were lying.

It was in LA, after he waited outside the conference room and watched his love—Sara Haenfler from Cleveland her name tag had read—flirt with the muscle beach guy from Scottsdale, that he first decided it was his job to confront them with the lies.

He would have said something there in the hotel lobby, but he was distracted by a spot on his tie. When he looked up she was headed toward the elevator, the brain dead idiot nowhere in sight. They probably had planned a little rendezvous, he thought. He hurried toward the elevators, hoping to maybe catch her just getting on one. In his scripting of the confrontation, he would say his piece, tear her sanctimonious sense of self-importance to shreds and then jump off the elevator at the first stop.

But she didn't get on there, instead continued walking towards the parking garage. Maybe she wasn't staying at the hotel. Some agencies booked less expensive lodgings for their employees at these conferences. He stopped her as she started down the flight of stairs to the lower level.

"Excuse me, Sara," he said politely enough. "May I speak with you?"

Her reaction was all-wrong. She acted as though a man's attention would never be welcomed when just minutes ago she had been chatting away with that no-necked guy.

"I am kind of in a hurry." She backed away from him as he came down the short flight of stairs. Still facing him, she moved towards the other end of the landing. "I have to report to the local office, they are expecting me."

Liar, he screamed silently. He smiled to reassure her, but faced a look of horror mixed with disgust in response.

When she tried to run, he grabbed for her arm and was shocked when his fingers pressed her hair against her throat.

In Seattle was a little different, but she had that same look of repugnance, as did

New York and Houston. Boston was a bit different, because she pretended to listen to him, but he could tell she was just humoring him

He had felt somewhat sorry about the others, but Boston he didn't mind. She had even tried to dissuade him with offers of sex, as if he would lie down with a liar. He'd considered not coming to another conference after Boston.

When he called he only intended to inquire about reservations, now unsure of himself, his mission.

"Did you hear about the women who got killed at your convention?" his travel agent's voice asked, pretending to be friendly. "Conventions are dangerous these days. You better be careful."

Her words, her tone were enough for him. He confirmed his reservations. And now Minneapolis appeared ready to add herself to his list.

Please, can't this one just be shy. Almost as if she could hear his thoughts, the object of his love relaxed her shoulders now and returned his smile.

The sweat began to flood to the ends of this short shirt sleeves. He dabbed his forehead and had an overwhelming urge to leave the seminar room. Trying to look smooth, but knowing that he couldn't, he gathered the handouts for the session and headed for the exit. He was actually dripping sweat as he fled, feeling as though the knot of his tie was getting tighter. No longer wheezing, his breath was coming in gasps.

In the lobby, the air conditioning turned his sweat quickly cold. He shivered violently at the temperature change. The elevator opened in front of him and he pressed the shiny button for his floor still gasping for air. Several people entered the elevator on the shopping mall level attached to the hotel. He found himself pressed against the glass wall at the back of the elevator. His sweat became adhesive and his shirt was stuck to his back by the time he exited the car several breathless floors later.

Alone in his room he replayed the interaction which had so thrilled and disturbed him. She had actually smiled at him. He had never really considered the possibility. It had become a routine at these conferences: the confrontation, the silencing of their screams as he told them exactly what kind of people they were, the hoped-for-but-never-seen acknowledgment, and the final stare of stupidity.

That was all gone now. After several minutes of deep breathing he became calm enough to change out of his sweat covered clothing. The tie that he had been wearing was completely soaked and the knot had become Gordian. He struggled to pull the slicked silk over his head. To some degree he felt thrilled by all the sensations, all the emotions.

His world at home was tightly ordered. He never allowed himself to act out these things there. It was only with the anonymity of being in a big city that he felt comfortable in loosening the strings. But he could feel them constricting like drying leather around his chest as he considered the meaning of that smile. Surely the smile was just another lie, just one more affront.

The tie finally slipped over his brow and scraped painfully as it pulled past his ears and messed his oily hair. Stripping his now soaked clothing, he caught a glimpse of himself in the bureau mirror. He felt some how transformed, like those other times, but different as well.

Maybe what he had until now considered deluded diversions could actually become realized. Maybe it wasn't necessary that he only gain ascendancy on the backs—or more appropriately necks—of others.

Stop it. It's a lie. The lies are as easy as breathing for them.

He dressed mechanically as the battle waged and raged. The worst that could happen, he figured, was that she was just another one, the best that she was a rare one. Either way, this was his vacation—his dime so to speak—he would not flee without learning.

Not one to enter a conversation without first scripting it out, he began to approach her mentally as he left his room. She would have the choice to smile again or not, but she was not in control, he decided. It was his plan, his to plot, his to block. He framed the script quickly.

As he devised a revision of his plan, the opening elevator door revealed the co-star of this mental melodrama.

“Oh,” was all she said, and it was more than he was able for all his planning.

No, this isn't right, I'm not ready. She stepped off the elevator. He could have bolted for the car, but she blocked his path. Either by accident or design, he was trapped. She was taller than he had thought but just as unreasonably beautiful. Her sweater seemed even tighter as she stood there. He watched her chest swell and collapse with her breathing. He noticed the delicate line of her neck with a complex of dark veins visible through her pale complexion. He watched her improbable lips purse and pulse for several seconds before realizing that she was speaking

“I was so surprised that you smiled at me. I must have seemed horribly conceited. You see this is my first time, and I figured you were making fun of me or that you were married and just being friendly. I mean the thought never occurred to me that you might actually have an interest in me. Or if you did, you didn't want to know me other than biblically.”

Her voice—soft and sweet like cotton candy—was just as unlikely as the rest of her.

She introduced herself. He did the same.

“Not that I'm a prig—I mean let's be honest there are lots of people in the Twin Cities tonight looking to hook up for something anonymous—but it's like I said: This is my first time, and I'm not sure how it's supposed to go.”

They had been standing there for a full minute, and he had only said his name. He fought desperately to remember the scripting that she had interrupted.

“Actually I saw you at check-in yesterday and was going to talk to you then, but you seemed so serious. I figured that you couldn't possibly be part of the conference. I thought only creepy academic types would be here, not anyone real. I was shocked to see you in the seminar room. And then your smile just swept me off my feet.”

He felt the stopcock of his sweat glands burst to full open.

“I got scared, it's my first time you know. I couldn't believe that anyone as normal and handsome could possibly be interested in me. I don't blame you for storming out. I just came to apologize.”

The up arrow over the door behind her went on, and seconds later, a half dozen people stepped their way around the two of them.

“We probably shouldn’t stand here. Is your room around here?”

He could only grunt and motion towards the end of the hall, wondering if he had thrown his waterlogged clothes into the complimentary laundry/trash bag hanging in the closet.

Playing it cool, he desperately tried to recall if there were any other potentially embarrassing items in view.

With perspiration pooling down his back, he slipped the keycard in the door. The door purred and the little lights blinked. He turned the handle and entered in front of her quickly scanning the room for embarrassments.

The coast was clear as she followed him into the room. This can’t be happening, he thought. She can’t really be interested, but here she was.

He felt a pressure building. He recognized the feeling. He’d felt it five times before. He had no choice, she was no different then the others. The decision made, he turned to her.

He didn’t see from where she pulled the pistol, but there was the blue-steeled weapon twice the size of her gripping knuckle-white hand.

“Like I said, this is my first time. If you don’t mind, I would like you to empty your pockets onto the bureau here,” motioning with the barrel, “I do know how to use this if you’re wondering.”

He slowly deposited his wallet, a thousand dollars held by a silver money clip, his plastic door key, a pair of latex gloves, and a mechanical pencil where she had indicated.

“Now open the room safe.” He showed her that it was empty, as was his custom in case of speedy departures. She scooped up his wallet and money.

“Take off your pants.”

He hesitated.

“Dream on, buster. Take them off and put them in the toilet.”

He complied as she nimbly danced a constant distance between them. She also made him empty his suitcase into the tub and open the cold-water tap. He trembled when she told him to kneel down facing the window and away from her. For only a moment, he considered a silent prayer, quickly abandoning the embarrassing notion of mercy.

“Hands behind your back please.”

The handcuffs clicked coldly into place.

He sensed the blow to the back of his neck before it landed, but with his hands behind him he couldn’t protect himself from falling face first into the carpet. His lips mashed into his teeth as he landed. He tasted blood in his mouth, and heard the door closing behind her.

He recognized the stupid stare of his reflection in the sliding glass door to the balcony.